

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS A "HYBRID" SCIENCE¹

1988

Simon Schwartzman

Gone are the days when one could trust that scientific knowledge was the product of a set of self-centered, independent and clearly identifiable endeavors of the collective mind, or, on the contrary, when one could create scandal or shatter beliefs by demonstrating that this was not the case. The old antinomy between pure vs. bounded knowledge has given way to an extremely complex picture of how different types of knowledge are actually created, developed, accepted as valid and put to use by different people in different places. In this century, epistemology has largely moved from the search for the ultimate foundations of "true" knowledge to the empirical analyses of language or the history of scientific traditions and the organization of scientific communities². Sociologists of science, in the meantime, have tried to penetrate as deeply as possible in the ways the so-called scientific knowledge is actually produced, and some authors have even proclaimed their kind of sociology to be the only epistemology that could actually exist³.

Without entering into the complex discussions on the subject, which continue unabated, I would contend that it is impossible to expect a return to the establishment of clear rules of demarcation for the boundaries between scientific and non-scientific knowledge, as proposed by Popper or Lakatos. This disbelief in Science with a capital "S" does not require, however, to abandon the concerns with the questions of truth and

¹ This is an extremely crude and provisional set of notes, which could eventually lead to a research project. It is for discussion only.

² Second Wittgenstein on Language, Thomas Kuhn on scientific communities, Gaston-Granger on the history of structuralism. It is curious to note that Thomas Kuhn's classic text on scientific revolutions (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982) was originally written for a collection on the Unified Science, an ambitious project it has helped to destroy.

³ Bloor, D. : *Knowledge and Social Inquiry*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979

cognitive validity, the same as the disbelief in God does not lead necessarily to the abandonment of the quest for ethics and morality. In both cases, however, the task becomes much more difficult, and purely normative solutions have to give way to the introduction of comparative and empirically induced perspectives. A forceful view of the difficulties and possibilities involved is given us by Clifford Geertz, which deserves to be quoted at length:

"The subjectivism charge, which certain sorts of sociologists and historians of science attract perhaps a bit more than the rest of us, is that if one interprets ideologies or theories wholly in terms of the conceptual horizons of those who hold them one is left without a means of judging either their cogency or the degree to which one represents one advance over another (...). "The view that thought is very you find it, that you find it in all sorts of cultural shapes and social sizes, and that those shapes and sizes are what you have to work with is somehow taken as a claim that there is nothing to say about it except, when in Rome, to each his own, across the Pyrenees, and not in the South." "But there is a great deal more to say. A great deal more about, as I mentioned, translation, how meanings get moved, or does not, reasonably intact from one sort of discourse to the next; about intersubjectivity, how separate individuals come to conceive, or not, reasonably similar things; about how thought frames change (revolutions and that), how thought provinces are demarcated ("today we have naming of fields"), how thought norms are maintained, thought models acquired, thought labor divided. The ethnography of thinking, like any other sort of ethnography -- of worship, or marriage, or government, or exchange -- is an attempt not to exalt diversity but to take it seriously as itself an object of analytic description and interpretive reflection. And as such it poses a threat neither to the integrity of our moral fiber not to what linguists, psychologists, neurologists, primatologists, or artificers of artificial intelligence might contrive to find out about the constancies of perception, affect, learning or information processing." (C. Geertz, "The Way we think now: Ethnography of modern thought". In *Local Knowledge - Further Essays in Interpretive Sociology*. New York, Basic Books, 1983, p. 154

The variety, contextuality and "indexicality"⁴ of the so-called "scientific knowledge" does not mean that concerns for competent, stable, consistent, verifiable,

⁴ See, on "indexicality", after Wittgenstein II (cf. Baker & Hacker, "Indexicals", in Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding, chapter VI), Karin Knorr-Cetina, The Manufacture of

enlightening, meaningful and effective knowledge are not significant, even if each one of these terms can be opened for discussion. In other words, it is impossible to subscribe to the notion that, since no principle of demarcation is possible, then knowledge is just another cover for power, and, in struggles for power, "everything goes". Different intellectual traditions have their own criteria for what is acceptable and what is not, and, in spite of the unavoidable sociological mechanisms by which these criteria always operate, it is not the same if they respond to sheer manifestations of prestige and authority mechanisms or if they leave room for experimentation, testing and challenge by peers. Different bodies of knowledge can be closer to some knowledge ideals than others, and can be compared; it should be possible to argue that economics, for instance, is much more consistent and effective than political science, while anthropology can probably be shown to be more enlightening than business administration. Experimentation, testing, peer review mechanisms and similar features are, one could say, "external" ingredients of a knowledge tradition, and one could not infer from their existence the "quality" of the knowledge being produced, whatever meaning we attach to that term. In fact, the adoption of these external features is a well-known tactics adopted by upcoming, "new" fields trying to get established with the prestige and acknowledgment of more traditional scientific fields. Even so, it is possible to argue that the organization of knowledge producers in relatively independent and self-centered communities is a necessary, although by no means sufficient, condition for the development of "good" knowledge. Finally, since there are significant differences between "good" and "bad" knowledge, it is not indifferent if a public agency, for instance, makes use of one or the other for attaining its objectives.

"Quality of knowledge", however, is hardly a clear and one-dimensional concept. We have suggested that "quality" is usually a measure of fitness between some kind of knowledge and some standard (or paradigm?), and these standards or paradigms are seldom comensurate. This discussion leads quite naturally towards the search for a

Knowledge.- An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1981

typology of scientific traditions, or "cultures". Tony Becher⁵ has done a lot in terms of an anthropology of scientific communities, which deserves to be read again. In any case, a typology should be based on some criteria, for instance the way the objects of knowledge are approached, whether a field is predominantly inductive or deductive, how much it relies on intellectual traditions or paradigmatic teachings, and so forth. It should be possible, however, to move a step further, and to come to more interesting classifications and contrasts if one moves to fields which are closer to each other, and take into account not only the external links and influences present in the constitution of different scientific traditions, or discourses, but also the way they relate to their object. An "interesting" typology should be more than a way of reducing a large variety of observations to a few types, and should be a way of ordering different knowledge traditions according to some criteria that is meaningful across them.

We can test some of these general notions if we take a typical "hybrid"⁶ field like public administration, and try to look at it in a comparative way. In this field, more clearly perhaps than in many others, we can see how knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is generated through complex negotiations and interchange between human beings and social communities, as well as between them and nature. A good deal of the contemporary sociology of knowledge deals precisely with these different actors and their interchange. Some examples:

- The state, in some societies, organizes its own teaching and research institutions, and try to create its own expertise.
- Professional communities get organized in academies, universities, scientific societies and similar institutions, in an effort to control the quality of the

⁵ Becher, T. - "The Cultural View", in Clark, B. - Perspectives on Higher Education, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 165-198.

⁶ Ben-David had written about "hybrid" scientific roles, and the special role they play in the constitution of scientific traditions. A closer look at this is in order (see the recent issue of Minerva in Ben-David's memory).

knowledge tradition from which it operates, and the certification of its members, in an effort to free themselves from external controls.

- The state tries to endow its technical institutions with a "scientific" image, in an effort to increase its credibility and, eventually, its competence; in this process, it acquires the values and prestige hierarchies which are typical of scientific and professional communities;
- Scientific and professional communities search for the support of the State or of other large clients, and adopt, in this process, some of the features defined by the clients' expectations.

The ways by which these negotiations and reciprocal adjustments occur vary from country to country, and from knowledge traditions to knowledge traditions. The French state, for instance, has traditionally trained its own civil servants, while the United States recruits them in the Universities. Anthropology as a knowledge tradition is supposed to have developed together with the expansion of the modern colonial empires; today, however, it enjoys a considerable amount of academic and institutional autonomy. Economics seem to have followed a similar path. Public Administration, however, or education, are fields which have shown much more difficulties in getting an independent, differentiated and self-centered tradition.

A fruitful approach to these differences could be to try to see whether there are links that can be established between the conditions in which these elite formation attempts are carried on and their specific contents. The contents can be seen in terms of different elements:

- a) Disciplinary differences - economics, engineering, sociology, political science?
- b) Beyond disciplinary differences, the nature of the object to be studied. Is the object something to be manipulated? (Engineering and social engineering of different kinds)? Is the reality made up of rules to be understood (Law), traditions to be followed (history), people to relate with (human relations approaches) or to convince (rhetoric?)

Is reality endowed with resilient "laws" and autonomy to be studied and interpreted (sociology, economics)? Human nature or biology to be understood and manipulated (genetics)? Souls to be saved (religion)? In part, these differences are related to disciplines, but, in part, they depend on the way the state is organized and relates with society as a whole.

c - a Kuhnian concern: before disciplinary or object/subject differentiation, a question of scientific and academic practices. How are people to be trained and educated? Through military drills (Polytechnique?) Through rote memorization (Samurai, Mandarins?) Through practical exercises and experiences (American Business Schools?) What determines what? How are these educational practices related to institutionalization of the training systems (military, legal, applied/business, scientific/empirical, etc?)

d - is it possible, or useful, to place these questions in terms of Habermas and talk about discourse interests, different types of cognitive discourses, etc.?

e - also, look at different disciplines and approaches not as final products, but as something in progress. How are these traditions established? When are they attempted, and fail? What are the conditions for their success? What does "success" mean? Institutionalization? Established competence? Social legitimation?

f - the independent variables can be defined in the Wager/Wittrock/Wollman terms of "discourse coalitions" and discourse institutionalization⁷. As a matter of fact, we can start from there...

g - then, of course, the explanatory and independent variables. Benefiting from the Ringer - Liedman debate, ideas and concepts should be seen in the context of their

⁷ Wagner, Peter , Carol Hirschon Weiss, Bjorn Wittrock, e Hellmut Wollman. 1991. Social sciences and modern states national experiences and theoretical crossroads. Cambridge England, New York: Cambridge University Press.

social roles, but also in the context of their debate and dialogue⁸. Who is suggesting which kinds of contents? Are they responses to whom? What are the main debates, or concerns, in the emergence of specific traditions?

I think these scattered ideas could give place to a more or less coherent research project on the way "public administration" as a discipline has evolved in different contexts - or, which is the same, how different states have tried to train their elites. The main novelty of the project, if it has one, would be the stress placed on the different contents, defined in the terms above.

⁸ Liedman, Sven-Eric. 1986. "Institutions and ideas: Mandarins and non-mandarins in the German academic intelligentsia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28(01):119-44; Ringer, Fritz K. 1990. *The decline of the German mandarins: the German academic community, 1890-1933*. Hanover: University Press of New England.